



# Intermediary Functions and Features in Pathways Systems

## AT A GLANCE

This resource clarifies the roles intermediaries play in college and career pathways systems. It can be useful for envisioning a brand-new organization or strengthening the intermediary functions of an existing organization. Your organization can use this guide during a strategic planning process or at any time to reflect on its practices, shift its focus, or reconnect to its mission.

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## About JFF

JFF is a national nonprofit that drives transformation in the American workforce and education systems. For more than 35 years, JFF has led the way in designing innovative and scalable solutions that create access to economic advancement for all. [www.jff.org](http://www.jff.org)

## About Building Equitable Pathways

This work, funded by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, aims to provide youth with the information and support they need to make informed choices for their futures—especially young people who have too often been denied access to these key resources. The goal is to dramatically increase the number of young people, ages 14 to 24, who are Black, Latinx, or experiencing poverty, who have the agency, social capital, skills, and credentials needed to thrive in the workforce and in life. A deep commitment to diversity, equity, and inclusion stands at the heart of this initiative. [www.jff.org/equitablepathways](http://www.jff.org/equitablepathways)

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## What Is an Intermediary Organization?

Intermediary organizations play a critical part in developing, organizing, and mobilizing [equitable college and career pathways](#). This makes them key players in creating systems that yield more equitable outcomes for young people. Intermediaries—sometimes known as *backbone organizations* or *community quarterback organizations*—act as the “glue” of a pathways ecosystem. They bring diverse partners together around a common cause, provide cohesion for collective efforts, and support impact at scale. Intermediaries unite and collaborate with all key partners to establish a collective vision and set of goals for a pathways ecosystem. They also operationalize the work, coordinating the design and implementation of statewide, regional, and local pathways systems. Intermediaries are transparent, credible organizations that are positioned to work across multiple stakeholder groups, including employers and educational institutions.

### Intermediaries Take Many Forms

Intermediaries should be designed to meet the needs and goals of the community and pathways ecosystem in which they work. Some serve primarily in a convener role, providing little, if any, direct services because they facilitate connections to other organizations that serve this function. Other intermediaries build [work-based learning \(WBL\) delivery systems](#) to provide these important experiences for young people. They develop WBL sequences and structures with educational institutions and build partnerships with key employers, employer associations, and sector organizations in order to identify, aggregate, and broker WBL opportunities at scale. In some instances, such intermediaries also connect young people with the world of work by delivering WBL services, including directly preparing young people for employment and placing and supporting them in the workplace. Other intermediaries support partnerships and provide guidance in addition to contributing concrete resources to pathways systems, such as personnel and funding. Many intermediaries both serve as conveners and provide direct services, and their forms can and do shift over time.

Intermediaries may be situated within larger organizations or exist as standalone entities.

#### Pathways Systems and Ecosystems

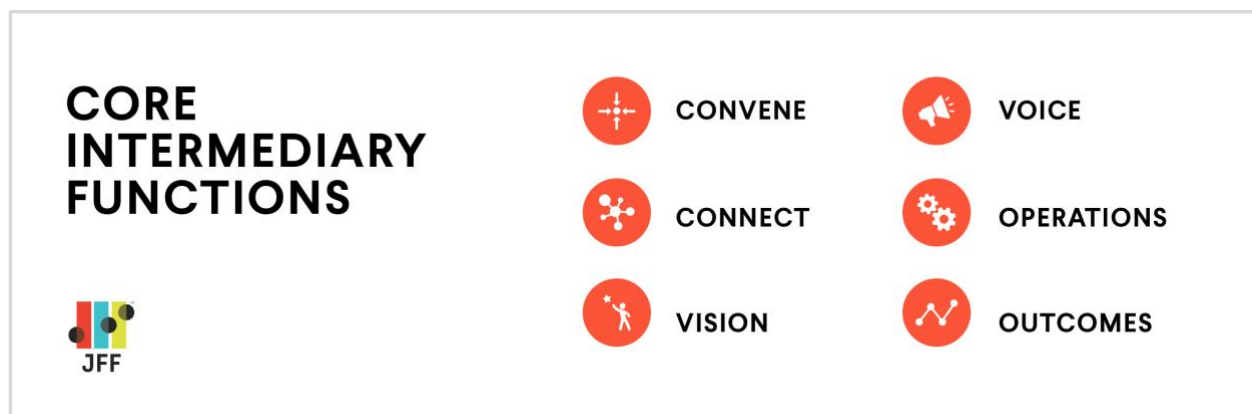
**A pathways system** is an intentionally designed sequence of aligned educational and WBL experiences that help people explore, prepare for, and launch successful careers.

**A pathways ecosystem** refers to the many partners and stakeholders that coordinate and collaborate to create, scale, and sustain a pathways system.

Sometimes mission-aligned organizations—such as community colleges, chambers of commerce, and community-based organizations—take on core intermediary functions in pathways systems. As long as the core intermediary functions are clearly owned and understood by all partners in the pathways ecosystem, the intermediary functions can be spread across multiple organizations.

There is no one-size-fits-all approach to designing an intermediary, because each one needs to be responsive to its community’s partners, strengths, needs, and vision. There are, however, clear intermediary functions and features that must be considered in the design of a quality pathways system. Clarity about an intermediary’s identity and role in its ecosystem is critical for the success of all partners and in service of transformative outcomes for young people.

## Core Intermediary Functions in Pathways Systems



Intermediaries have the potential to perform six core functions to support the design, scale, and sustainability of an equitable pathways system:

- **Convene:** Intermediaries engage and convene key leaders and organizations around a shared pathways agenda. They organize a pathways partnership that comprises representatives from all key partners that are responsible for the strategic planning and leadership of the work, including the development of the vision, goals, and design for a pathway system.
- **Connect:** Intermediaries connect diverse community stakeholders into specific aspects of the pathways work. Through this, intermediaries build public will for pathways and broker relationships across the community.

- **Vision:** Intermediaries lead the cocreation of a shared vision for the pathways work, catalyzing diverse ideas into a common focus. They shape shared goals, focus on effective and efficient use of resources and human capital in pathways ecosystems, and guide the strategic direction and sustainability of the pathways work.
- **Voice:** Intermediaries are conduits of communication about the pathways work, by both connecting with active partners and promoting the work more visibly in the field.
- **Operations:** Intermediaries transform vision into action plans and help partners to operationalize the pathways work, including aggregating field knowledge and best practices for broader dissemination, implementation, and impact.
- **Outcomes:** Intermediaries focus on outcomes, providing partner and public accountability for the work. In consultation with partners and key stakeholders, intermediaries set measurable goals, report publicly on progress, and hold partners accountable through memorandums of understanding or other formal agreements.

## The Role of Intermediaries in Leading With Equity

Intermediaries leading with equity have a commitment to improving systems and outcomes for youth of color and for young people experiencing poverty. Given the deep-rooted structural and systemic inequities in our society, these young people face barriers to their success that intermediary organizations can support them in overcoming. By participating in high-quality and deliberately equitable pathways, young people can develop the knowledge, experiences, and strategies needed to navigate and overcome inequity and injustice in the education and workforce systems. At the same time, they can develop the agency, social capital, skills, and credentials needed to thrive in the workforce, in their communities, and in life. By visibly leading with a focus on diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI), intermediaries can motivate systems leaders to identify, acknowledge, and dismantle these inequitable structural and systemic barriers. A commitment to DEI values, policies, and practices is not a separate aspect of the intermediary work; it is embedded in everything an intermediary does. DEI is the north star to guide the pathways system.

Intermediaries can center DEI in their work by:

- Intentionally establishing the organization in communities that have been marginalized and face barriers to academic and economic opportunities
- Amplifying and elevating the voices of young people of color, young people experiencing poverty, and their families and communities in reports and other written collateral, as

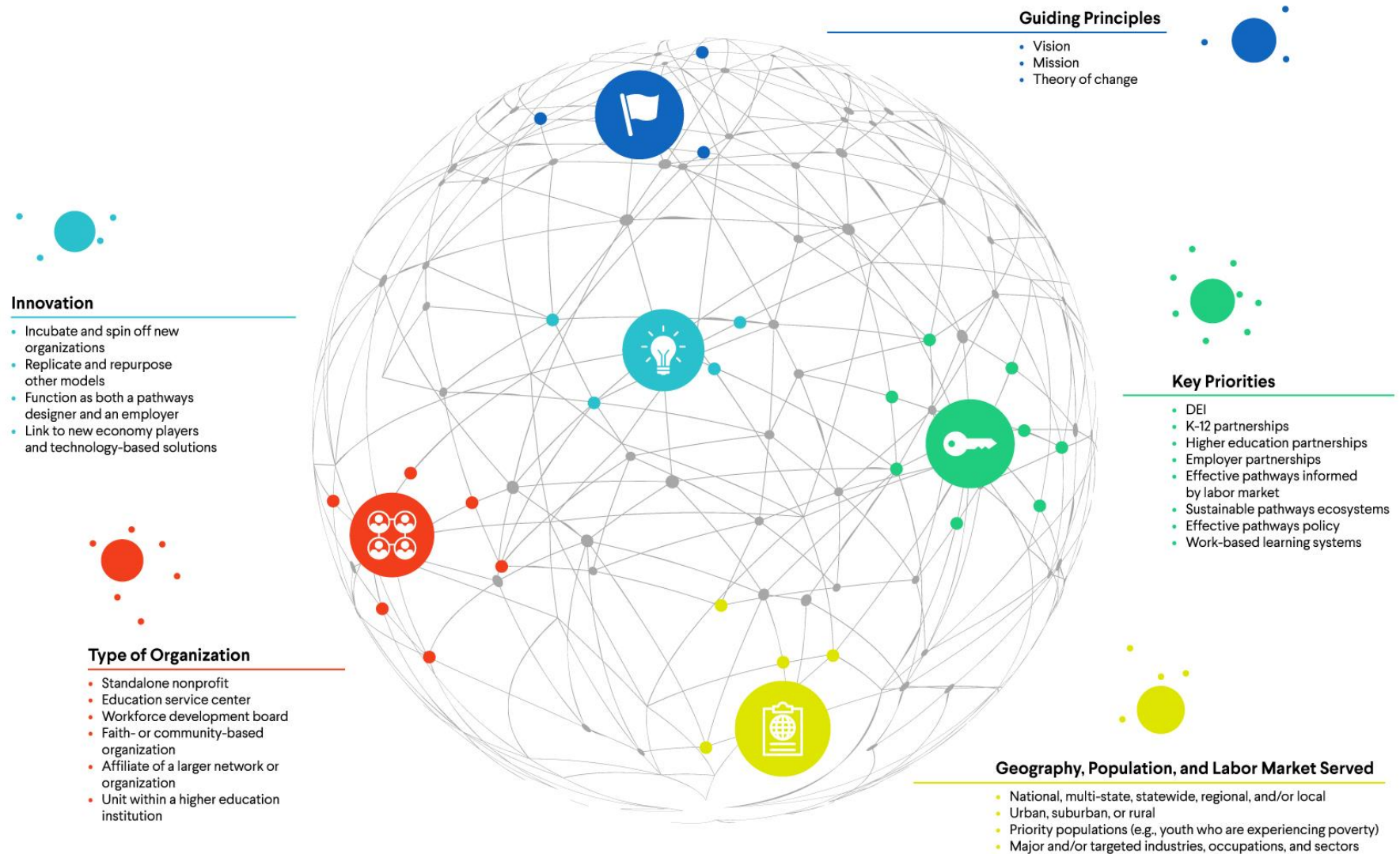
well as during meetings and events, and advocating on their behalf in contexts in which they are not present or able to do so themselves

- Prioritizing the needs and goals of young people of color and young people experiencing poverty when designing partnerships with secondary, postsecondary, and employer leaders
- Increasing culturally responsive outreach, access, and engagement for young people of color and young people experiencing poverty in opportunities such as dual enrollment, WBL, and college and career pathways
- Providing culturally responsive training to employer partners and mentors that may not be used to working with young people
- Using [labor market information](#) to increase access to and enrollment of young people of color and young people experiencing poverty in pathways that lead to high-growth, in-demand careers that pay family-supporting wages and offer a lifetime of fulfillment
- Disrupting discriminatory placement of young people of color in pathways that lead to low-wage jobs without career growth potential
- Leveraging the intermediary's reputation, influence, power, and authority to support and advocate for equitable policies at the state, regional, local, and institutional levels to support career pathways

## Intermediary Features for Consideration in Design

Intermediaries should consider the five features that follow in their designs for college and career pathways (*see Intermediary Features below*). Some of these features are shaped or determined by the ecosystem and community in which an intermediary operates; others are more self-determined by the organization, in line with its core vision and mission. We include an example statement for each feature and encourage all intermediaries to clearly articulate their stance and role within each of these feature areas.

# Intermediary Features





## Geography, Population, and Labor Market Served



**Geography, Population, and Labor Market Served**

- National, multi-state, statewide, regional, and/or local
- Urban, suburban, or rural
- Priority populations (e.g., youth who are experiencing poverty)
- Major and/or targeted industries, occupations, and sectors

Intermediaries may have a broad or narrow geographic scope for their pathways work. If an intermediary is a statewide organization, it will likely focus on influencing policy and building systems and will organize and support other entities that implement the work on the ground. A community-based intermediary will work directly with local leaders and implementers and may even provide some direct services to young people in its region. The contextual focus of the intermediary can be further narrowed by priority populations and target industry sectors.

### *Key Considerations*

- National, multi-state, statewide, regional, and/or local focus for pathways
- Urban, suburban, or rural context
- Priority populations (e.g., youth who are experiencing poverty)
- Major and/or targeted industries, occupations, and sectors; could be a focus on many sectors, or on one priority sector

### *Questions*

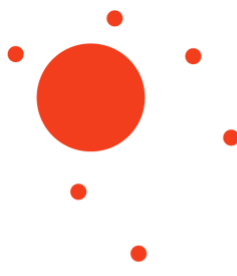
Who are the people you serve? What are the education and income levels of your priority population(s)? What are the primary industries in your area? What are the key education, workforce, employer, and community partners you need to reach?

### Example Statement

*Our organization serves predominantly Latinx youth who are experiencing poverty in East Los Angeles, many of whom are seeking steady work and would benefit from postsecondary training and credentials. Our ecosystem is local and urban. The major industries in the area are health care, government, and small businesses.*

## Type of Organization

How an organization is structured will impact the intermediary functions it undertakes. For example, a small nonprofit organization that primarily serves as an intermediary can be nimbler and more responsive to the pathways ecosystem than a large organization that serves many purposes beyond the intermediary functions. An affiliate of a larger network can have greater reach and broader impact than a single-site organization, which may make a deeper impact on a more local scale. An organization with strong business and industry connections can be more effective in mobilizing WBL opportunities. Organizational history matters as well—whether the organization is just getting established as a community resource with the opportunity to invent a new vision for the work, or it has been a trusted partner doing work with youth over decades, it will affect the work the intermediary can take on.



### Type of Organization

- Standalone nonprofit
- Education service center
- Workforce development board
- Faith- or community-based organization
- Affiliate of a larger network or organization
- Unit within a higher education institution

### Sample Types of Organizations

- Standalone nonprofit
- Education service center
- Workforce development board
- Faith- or community-based organization
- Affiliate or branch of a larger network or organization
- Unit within a higher education institution

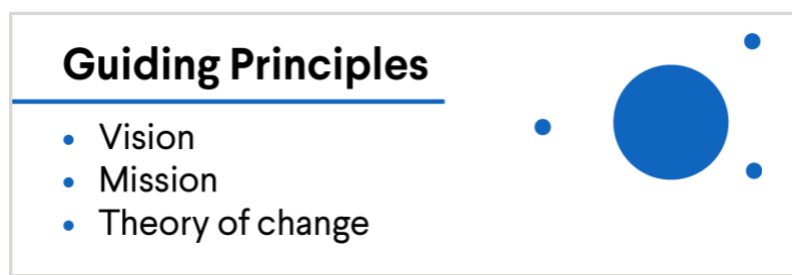
## Questions

Your organization type shapes your governance, priorities, and funding. Does your organization select its own director? How are decisions made in your organization? How is funding for your work as an intermediary obtained and sustained? How is success defined and impact measured?

## Example Statement

*We are a regional workforce board that has raised public and philanthropic funds to expand our services to in-school youth. We provide paid internships in a framework developed by the employers we serve. We have our own advisory board but also answer to our state workforce board.*

## Guiding Principles



Many intermediaries and intermediary functions are housed within larger organizations with broader work and their own distinct visions and missions. However, the work of intermediaries requires clear, compelling guiding principles that are cocreated with core partners in the pathways ecosystem. We encourage every organization engaged in intermediary work to lead their key stakeholders in a process to define the pathways work they are collectively taking on and their long-term vision for success.

## What This Is Exemplified By

- Vision
- Mission
- Theory of change for the intermediary functions

## Key Considerations

An organization's vision denotes its long-term outcome. Its mission denotes the activities the organization is undertaking today to enact its vision. The theory of change is an if-then statement that unpacks how the organization will accomplish its mission.

## Example Statements

- *Vision: Latinx communities in the region have strong educational and economic foundations that allow for a lifetime of options, fulfillment, and security.*
- *Mission: All Latinx youth in our community have paid WBL opportunities that lead to college and good jobs.*
- *Theory of change: If we engage employer partners first and broker relations between them and education partners, then we will create the pathways to the high-skill, in-demand jobs that pay a family-supporting wage.*

## Key Priorities

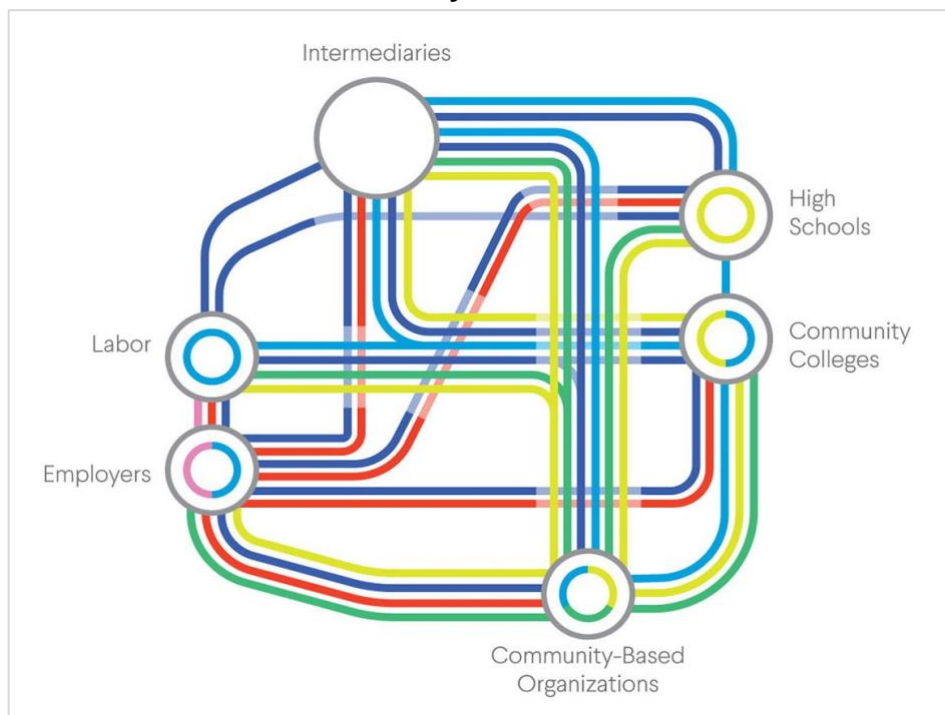


**Key Priorities**

- DEI
- K-12 partnerships
- Higher education partnerships
- Employer partnerships
- Effective pathways informed by labor market
- Sustainable pathways ecosystems
- Effective pathways policy
- Work-based learning systems

All pathways intermediaries engage and connect similar entities in order to create seamless pathways systems that engage high schools, community colleges, and other higher education and training providers; labor and workforce development boards; community-based organizations; and businesses (*see Intermediaries as Core Ecosystem Nodes below*). Each entity plays a key role in supporting young people’s career development and advancement, and intermediaries help to prioritize key roles among other stakeholders, depending on what the ecosystem demands.

## Intermediaries as Core Ecosystem Nodes



### Sample Priority Areas

While not all intermediaries will directly lead the work in all of the priority areas listed below, the intermediaries must understand and manage how these partnerships and priorities are integrated into a coherent and connected pathways ecosystem.

- Centering DEI in the work
- Partnering with [K-12](#) leaders
- Partnering with [higher education](#) leaders
- Partnering with [employers](#)
- Using labor market information to [design effective pathways](#)
- Creating [sustainable](#) pathways ecosystems
- Designing and/or advocating for effective pathways [policy](#)
- Developing [WBL](#) systems

### Questions

In which of these priorities do your organization provide direct services and leadership, and in which do your organization coordinate and mobilize others to lead the work? How do you enact intermediary functions to ensure that your pathways ecosystem is connected and coherent—and

not duplicating services or creating gaps? How do you define and measure success in each of these priority areas?

### Example Statement

*We develop and aggregate WBL opportunities, which schools then distribute and monitor. We have strong one-to-one relationships with the key education and employer partners we convene. We are working to develop a policy agenda for our state.*


## Innovation

While we build upon existing strategies with a research and evidence base of success, we also acknowledge that our existing systems enable inequities and widespread economic immobility, so new and innovative strategies are required.

Intermediaries can play a key role as innovators and thoughtful risk takers in the name of improving equity and outcomes.

### Examples of Innovations

- Incubate and spin off new special function organizations
- Replicate and repurpose models built for a different ecosystem
- Function both as a pathways designer and an employer
- Link to new-economy players and technology-based solutions



### Innovation

- Incubate and spin off new organizations
- Replicate and repurpose other models
- Function as both a pathways designer and an employer
- Link to new economy players and technology-based solutions

### Questions

What is the unique strategy you use to prepare youth for the labor market? Is there an evidence-based intervention from elsewhere (another sector, industry, state, or country) that you have adapted for your setting? Have you combined old strategies in a new way? How are you leveraging technology and the disruption of COVID-19 to reimagine how young people connect with college and career pathways?

### **Example Statement**

*To compensate for outmoded and poorly resourced high school career programs, we have worked with employer partners to design and implement integrated learn-and-earn programs to provide initial training.*

## **Conclusion**

Intermediaries are the drivers for advancing high-quality pathways work, keeping it on track, and ensuring that partners are connected to and accountable for the shared vision they cocreated. Intermediaries also have a critical opportunity to lead with values, policies, and practices that improve systems and transform outcomes for youth of color and for young people experiencing poverty. They are well positioned to elevate this conversation and accelerate this commitment among their partners.

Every intermediary should consider the design features highlighted above to ensure that the role they play in their ecosystem is tailor-made to meet the needs of and amplify the strengths of its partners and the community it serves. Knowing the key functions and features of intermediaries within a high-quality pathways ecosystem can help all pathways partners to forge partnerships, craft strategies and innovative solutions, and source funding to meet the unique needs of their context. When intermediaries have clarity about their identities and roles, it benefits not only the organization but also every partner and young person connected to pathways.